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#### How to cite:

Seale, Jane; Gibson, Suanne; Haynes, Joanna and Potter, Alice (2015). Power and resistance: Reflections on the rhetoric and reality of using participatory methods to promote student voice and engagement in higher education. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 39(4) pp. 534–552.

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Version: Accepted Manuscript

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:

<http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.1080/0309877X.2014.938264>

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DOI: 10.1080/0309877X.2014.938264

THIS IS A PRE-PRINT VERSION

# **Power and resistance: Reflections on the rhetoric and reality of using participatory methods to promote student voice and engagement in higher education**

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# **Power and resistance: Reflections on the rhetoric and reality of using participatory methods to promote student voice and engagement in higher education**

## **ABSTRACT**

The focus of this paper is methods for facilitating student voice and engagement in higher education, specifically participatory methods. Across the student voice and engagement literature there is a growing emphasis on promoting collaborative partnerships between staff and students. However, there is a lack of detail and criticality with regards to 1) exactly how genuine partnerships can be achieved and 2) comparing the vision for and the reality of positioning 'students as partners' in the current higher education climate. In this paper, we evaluate the potential of participatory methods to facilitate quality partnerships between staff and students. Drawing on our experiences of being involved in a participatory project in one Higher Education Institution we offer reflective narratives from three different partners who participated in the project: student, lecturer and researcher. We use these narratives to explore the nature of the partnerships between lecturers and students, focusing specifically on issues of resistance and power. We conclude by considering the implications for how we conceptualise and implement student voice and engagement projects in higher education.

Keywords: student voice, student engagement, participation, partnerships. 'student as partner'

## INTRODUCTION

In a review of student voice initiatives in UK Higher Education Seale (2010) argued that conceptualisations of student voice were underdeveloped and as a result there was a lack of debate regarding how student voice was understood and enacted. Seale identified that what little student voice work that did exist was strongly aligned to higher education policy or practice agendas such as evaluation and feedback; reflective practice and student engagement or involvement agenda. Seale (2010) also identified five main roles that were assumed for students: student as story-teller; student as teacher or facilitator; student as evaluator or informant ; student as stakeholder or representative and student as consumer or customer. Seale argued that these different roles raise interesting questions about the nature of the relationship between students and lecturers.

From around 2009 onwards, student voice has become more and more synonymous with student engagement. The evaluation and feedback agenda has been subsumed as a component of student engagement and the reflective practice agenda has all but disappeared from policy discourse. The origins of this change can be traced back to 2007 when the Department for Innovations, Universities and Skills launched its student listening programme as part of a commitment to citizen engagement and the amplification of 'student voice'. This programme is exemplified by the establishment of the National Student Forum in 2008 “to ensure that policies are the better for being informed by the student voice” (NSF Annual Report 2008). In addition, HEFCE supported the partnerships of various stakeholders such as the National Union of Students and the Higher Education Academy to develop and promote student engagement policies and practices. One product of such partnership is the NUS (n.d) Student Engagement Toolkit in which student engagement is conceptualised as comprising three

elements: obtaining student evaluations of courses; establishing student representation on decision-making bodies and involving students in curriculum design. With this growing emphasis on student engagement has come a change in the conceptualisation of students. Increasingly, students are positioned as partners. For example, in their Higher Education Strategy document, The Welsh Assembly (2009,15) for example, made the following very powerful statement:

Students are partners in the higher education experience, with imagination, innovation and creativity [...] Students are more than passive consumers of learning, they are active contributors to improving the learning environment and, collectively, to being a force for influence and change.

Exactly how students might participate as partners in their higher education experience was not expanded upon. The new UK Quality Code for Higher Education (QAA, 2012a) includes a specific chapter on student engagement which asks higher education providers to take deliberate steps to engage students, individually and collectively, as partners to enhance their learning experiences. The QAA (2012a, 3) offers quite a lengthy definition of partnership:

'partner' and 'partnership' are used in a broad sense to indicate joint working between students and staff. In this context partnership working is based on the values of: openness; trust and honesty; agreed shared goals and values; and regular communication between the partners. It is not based on the legal conception of equal responsibility and liability; rather partnership working recognises that all members in the partnership have legitimate, but different, perceptions and experiences.

What is missing however from QAA and other similar policy documents is a lack of detail about how exactly genuine partnership can be achieved along with a lack of criticality regarding the

tensions that some researchers (e.g. Little et al. 2009) have observed to exist between institutions and students when students are positioned as both consumers and partners. Policy makers seem relatively unconcerned about these tensions, The QAA (2012b,5) for example, simply notes: "commentators have been discussing the different definitions of the student roles as 'consumers' and as 'partners' or co-creators' in the educational setting". Carey (2012) on the other hand displays some disbelief that despite the fact that such tensions exist, student engagement in higher education is under-researched and under-theorised.

### **Theorising students as partners**

Practical illuminations of the kind of roles that students may take on when they act in partnership with lecturers include: working as co-creators of institutional strategy ( Healey et al. 2010); contributing as peers in the pedagogical planning process ( Bovill et al 2011 ) and taking on the role of student representative (Carey, 2012). Little et al (2009) noted that the idea of students as partners is stronger in some subject areas than others, for example in Art and Design and Performing Arts.

Just as there is little conceptualisation of voice and participation in the student voice and engagement literature, so there is little theorisation of partnership. Rare examples include the work of Bain (2010) and Carey (2012). Bain draws on Freire's work on critical pedagogy and dialogic interactions to argue that partnerships in assessment can lead to empowered autonomous learners. Carey draws on Fielding's notion of 'radical collegiality' to argue against positioning students as consumers because this encourages a conceptualisation of students as passive 'data sources' and discourages ' the dynamic and radical expression of the student voice' that is demanded when students are conceptualised and treated as co-researchers in partnership with tutors. One thing a more in depth examination of partnership can

offer is the tools to examine in more detail the power relationship between teachers and students and to offer guidance on complex scenarios involving resistance and expertise. For example when:

- tutors appear to decide which aspects of student representations they will attend to and which they will ignore (Carey, 2012)
- students appear to resist the change that comes with co-creation and prefer traditional relationships with lecturers (Bovill et al.2011)
- uncritical value is placed on students' views, irrespective of the nature of these views (Bovill et al. 2011)
- the expertise or 'superior theoretical understanding' of lecturers is undervalued in partnerships with students (Bain, 2010)

### **Participatory research approaches to partnerships**

Seale (2010) proposed that there is value in using methods drawn from participatory research with children, older people and people with learning disabilities in student voice initiatives in higher education. Her central arguments for using these methods were twofold. Firstly, that participants are encouraged to own the outcome of the research by setting the goals and sharing in decisions about processes (Everitt *et al.* 1992). Secondly, that participatory research emphasises collaborative partnerships, but goes beyond this to emphasise non-hierarchical relationships (Cornwall and Jewkes, 1995) where researcher and participant have equal status and power. Seale pointed to similarities between participatory research approaches and the call by student voice researcher, Fielding (2004), for dialogic research which involves: collaborative agenda setting; appropriate methods of collecting data; debate about overall research design; production and analysis of collective research knowledge and enhancement of the group to



solve problems. Whilst Seale reported two examples of how she had used participatory research methods in student voice work, she did not evaluate in any great detail the nature or quality of the partnerships between students and staff. This is something this paper addresses. In the next section we describe a student voice project that used participatory methods and offer reflections from staff and student participants on the experience of being involved in such a project. We use these narratives to explore the nature of the partnerships between academics and students, focusing specifically on issues of resistance and power.

## **THE PARTICIPATORY PARTNERSHIPS IN EDUCATION (PIE) PROJECT**

The student voice project that is the focus of this paper was a Teaching Fellowship project funded by the central learning and teaching development unit of the host institution. The overarching aim of the project was to enable students on one undergraduate programme to have influence over the way their voice was heard, with the intention of responding genuinely, with improved insight, to the issues raised by students. Related project objectives were to: 1) capture “voices” of second year students in one particular programme, regarding their learning experiences on the first year of the programme and 2) involve students in the analysis and exploration of these “student voices” by developing a collaborative partnership whereby students help to develop materials and methods that can be used to inform future teaching on the programme. Given the sensitive nature of some of the outcomes of this project, we have chosen not to name the programme in order to try to maintain some degree of anonymity for the participants. However we can share that the undergraduate programme that was the focus of the PIE project was situated within a social science discipline with a strong emphasis of applying theory to practice.

In phase one of the project a steering committee was formed comprising programme team members and second year students from the programme. The role of the steering committee was to discuss and agree the different methods that would be offered to project participants to enable them to voice their learning experiences. Phase two focused on recruiting participants from the second year undergraduate programme who were willing to share their experiences of their first year of study). Phase three involved recruiting student 'co-researchers' from the second year cohort to work with the project team to analyse and interpret the themes and messages that could be drawn from the voices, paying particular attention to what programme teachers can learn about factors that contribute positively or negatively to the first year student experience. It was also planned to convene two to three focus groups of first year students to present analyses from the second year cohort and explore similarities and differences in the student experience. The final phase involved working with the steering committee to use the results from the project to inform the development and dissemination of staff development materials.

Given that the focus of this article is on the methods used to promote student voice and engagement a detailed analysis of the experiences that students shared with us will therefore not be presented. However, in order to put our experiences of the project into context it is important to note that from a cohort of 65 second year students we managed to recruit 3 students onto the steering committee. From a cohort of 65 second years, 11 students volunteered to contribute their experiences in phase two. This was significantly less than the numbers we had anticipated and took substantially longer than planned. This meant that the planned focus groups with first years became impractical and the steering committee decided instead to run an online survey with first years, comprising of 15 questions informed by data provided by second years. From a cohort of 65 first year students, 15 took part in the online survey. Two second year students volunteered to be co-researchers and to work with us to

analyse the student voice data and disseminate the findings (e.g. through a presentation to the BESA 2012 conference).

The original method for recruiting second year students into the project was a ten minute presentation at the end of a lecture towards the end of the first semester. In this presentation, the aims and objectives of the project were explained along with the three different roles that students could volunteer for: steering committee member, participant (giving feedback on student experience) and co-researcher. Information sheets were then handed out at the end of the presentation with students being invited to complete a reply slip if they wanted to volunteer to participate. Those who completed a reply slip were then sent a consent form to complete. This method was not entirely successful and alternative recruitment methods had to be adopted as we will reveal in the following reflective narratives.

A primary goal of the project was to enable students to make choices about whether and how they participated. One outcome of this, which we will describe in more detail later in this paper, was that the student steering committee members were influential in designing a tool for eliciting feedback that they called a 'Mood Board'. The Mood Board invited students to share their learning experiences in either a pictorial or text format (See Figure 1). The data that resulted from the Mood Boards was however primarily textual with students writing brief statements on various aspects of their learning experiences that were important to them. The team of co-researchers organised a one-day meeting in order to analyse this qualitative data. The eleven Mood Boards were divided between the co-researchers who were invited to read and identify themes that they felt were emerging from their Mood Boards. These themes were then shared and discussed with the whole group in order to agree a common set of 'themes' and how these would be defined. Once a set of themes were agreed, each co-researcher then went back to their allocated Mood Boards and highlighted quotes which could be coded against each of these

themes. These were then shared and agreed with the whole group. Analysis of the Mood Board data revealed five overarching themes:

1. **RESOURCES-WHAT THE STUDENTS GET:** Learning material made available to students to support their learning e.g. lecture notes, reference lists, video clips, library books, literature searching databases
2. **LECTURERS:-WHAT THEY DO:** How the lecturers behave, lecturing/tutoring style, attitudes towards students. Includes references to lecturers responding to student requests/feedback.
3. **WHAT IS TAUGHT ON THE PROGRAMME-** Comments about curriculum content areas; specific subjects (e.g. English); learning opportunities (e.g. field-trips) or skill areas (e.g. essay writing, referencing).
4. **HOW THE STUDENTS ARE TAUGHT AND ASSESSED-** Comments on way the course is delivered or designed and implications for what the students are required to do. Comments about how much is taught- length of programme, number of hours in a week.
5. **IMPACT-** Student comments about feelings, values and beliefs that illuminate the impact of the learning experience on them or the importance or value they place on a particular issue they have raised. (e.g. Comments on social cohesion of student body, belonging, interaction with peers.)

These five themes were used to inform the design and content of questions for an online survey of first year students in order to ascertain whether their experiences were similar or different to the second years. The co-researchers worked together to agree the design of the survey, which was conducted using Survey Monkey and produced a simple excel spreadsheet that analysed the frequency of responses against each question.

## **PARTICIPANT REFLECTIONS**

Drawing on our experiences of being involved in a participatory project in one Higher Education Institution we present reflective narratives from four different partners who participated in the project as co-researchers: student, researcher, programme leader and programme tutor. One of the key responsibilities of co-researchers that was outlined in recruitment information at the beginning of the project was to discuss and agree ways of disseminating the outcomes of the project. Whilst both of the students who had volunteered to be co-researchers were offered the opportunity to engage in these discussions at the end of the project, only one student co-researcher was able to maintain their participation all the way through to the writing stage. In discussions about potential dissemination, all four of the remaining co-researchers had agreed that given the nature of their experiences in being involved in the project they wanted to write a more reflexive account of the project than the standard 'project report'. Therefore, in this paper we will use these reflections to explore our experiences of the use of participatory methods in student engagement 'work' generally and more specifically, the partnerships between lecturers and students.

The production of this whole paper and the narratives within it has been a collaborative process, in that the structure and focus of the paper was negotiated and agreed with all four partners. Roles and responsibilities for who would write each section of the paper was agreed amongst the group and each partner has read and commented on each other's contribution. The academic partners worked to support the student partner who had not written for a journal before, but inevitably there were large differences in writing experiences which we tried to openly acknowledge and negotiate during the writing process.

## **Climbing the ivory tower: Alice's perspective as a student**

My motivation for taking part in the project is twofold. Firstly, I saw it as an opportunity to step away from the consumerism which appears to be the driving force in current HE provision. In this model, the student fee payer expects the university to provide a service, i.e. the facilities and teaching to allow the student to achieve a good degree and therefore, hopefully, a good job. This creates an instrumentalist form of learning where the student is likely to reject opportunities that do not directly affect their overall grade. The low uptake of students for this project is perhaps an example of this. However I find this a very negative view of students and I chose to prescribe to a more traditional view of HE where staff and students undertake research and learning together, with the mutually beneficial result of improving understanding of the subject. In other words, learning for learning's sake, not to achieve a 2:1. Alongside this motivation came the hope that this project would allow me to form links with other staff members in the university and to help develop better relationships with my tutors who were also participating on the project. The project needed students to participate, so by volunteering I had straight away placed myself in the tutor's good books. While I was under no illusion that this would affect my marks or the way the tutors treated me as a student, having a good relationship with your tutor is obviously beneficial. If, through the shared experience of the project, both become more comfortable in the others company then it is likely that subsequent interactions, such as tutorials concerning my degree work would be more open and productive. So perhaps I wasn't rejecting the instrumentalist narrative at all, just circumventing it; though this project would not count towards my degree it was an opportunity to raise my profile at the university, coming to know, or know better, people who could be a source of advice and information that could improve my degree work.

This is also the case in the second strand of my motivation: I wanted to take part in the project as I saw it as a valuable learning opportunity. I have previously had little experience in data collection and analysis. I hoped that working towards the write up of the project alongside experienced academic writers would improve my own writing. I saw this project as a useful insight into what it would be like to conduct a research project of my own, a requirement in the third year of my course. So again, although the project would not directly affect my results, I could use newly acquired skills to inform my university work with hopefully a positive effect on my final grade. In addition, it is often suggested that in the current job market a good degree is no longer enough, I believe having this project on my CV shows willingness to participate fully within the University, above the requirements of my degree.

In my role as a student co-researcher I chose to take part in three of the four options provided for student participation. I completed a mood board (see figure one) as part of the data collection, I was involved in the data analysis and now I am taking part in the write-up of the project. The fact that the participation options had been split into four defined categories is an example of how it seemed, at least at the beginning that the project belonged to the staff members and not the students; having pre-defined methods of participation, designed by staff, limited students' freedom in their involvement. The project was commissioned and instigated by university staff; perhaps students on the programme might have felt more inclined to participate if the project had originated from students, if we had expressed an interest or need to have our voices recorded.

When I began the project I did feel a lack of ownership, this was compounded by coming into the project mid-way (later than other students), which of course was my decision. However as time has passed I feel I have had a say in the direction the project has taken therefore my sense of ownership has increased.

The purpose of the project was to access student voice; an activity that has increased significantly with the consumerist focus of HE; however the opportunity to express my views about my course was not a significant motivator in my decision to take part. Firstly I am generally content with my university experience, so I did not feel that I had a particular grievance I needed to air or that I previously did not have a channel to do this if I did have a problem. I find people are more likely to seek the opportunity to air views if they perceive that something is wrong. Also, the University regularly designs questionnaires to harness student opinion, and it did feel slightly that I would be repeating views I had already expressed. Secondly, the project was specifically about experiences of the first year of the course, as I had already progressed from this stage I felt that any outcomes of the project would not benefit me. In theory it would be nice to help improve the course for future students, but in reality when this requires time out of a busy schedule, the 'How does this benefit me?' narrative is a deciding factor.

The project aimed to create equal partnerships between staff and student researchers; this clearly was hard to achieve; firstly because I also had to maintain a Student/Teacher relationship with staff involved in the delivery of my degree. This implies a power relationship (tutors being both markers and 'custodians of knowledge') Instinct tells you to avoid heavy disagreement with someone who has power over you, despite staff's assertions that they value your real opinions. Secondly, although I was an expert in the subject matter (being an education student), I was at a distinct disadvantage in my knowledge of undertaking this type of research, again this is not conducive to an equal partnership. However I would not say that I felt uncomfortable or undervalued in the project and I found it a fascinating and stimulating insight into the world of academic research.



## **To shout or not to shout: Jane's perspective as a participatory researcher**

I came to the PIE project with clear ideas about how I would like to do things, based on my previous experiences using participatory methods. In working with students and other academics on the PIE project it has been necessary for me to change some of these ideas in response to their feedback and ideas. This has been a challenge; the ideal of using participatory methods in student voice projects, whereby everyone has an equal say in how the project is conducted, can be really tested when having an equal say can result in the questioning and modification of ideas and principles that some or all partners hold. I offer one example of this, with regards to my relationship with my student partners.

At the beginning of the project, the steering committee met to discuss what methods should be used to try and capture student voices. As a starting point I shared with the committee the methods I had used in the a previous project called PAIRS (see Seale, 2010) where students were given the opportunity to choose one of five methods to tell their stories which ranged from writing a reflective journal that described a “critical incident” that was really positive or negative in terms of their learning experience to producing a piece of creative writing or art (e.g. poem, picture, sculpture, song) that expressed their feelings and experiences in relation to the quality of their learning experience. I was quite proud of these methods in terms of being more creative than the usual focus groups or surveys that tend to be used in student voice projects in higher education. Despite this, the student members of the committee were concerned that students would be overwhelmed by the number of choices. After a series of meetings, they proposed and developed their own singular method, which they called a 'Mood Board' (The idea is that students are given a blank sheet of A4 and invited to record their thoughts and impressions of the course in written or pictorial form. See Figure 1). After my initial disappointment that I would not get to try the PAIRS methods for a second time, I was excited that the students had been

empowered to reject staff-driven ideas for their own. Despite offering this student-designed method for participation, just eleven students volunteered. In reflecting on why this might be, several questions spring to my mind. Firstly, was there something about the methods used in the project (The 'Mood Board') that made participation unattractive to students? Secondly, should I have pushed harder for my own ideas? In not pushing harder was I denying the project the opportunity to benefit from my expertise? But if I had pushed harder, to what extent would I have abused my position and jeopardised the commitment to equal partnership?

<Figure one about here>

### **'But the emperor has no clothes! Suanne's perspective as a Programme Leader**

The beginnings are usually an exciting time for any new project or piece of work. 'Partnerships in education', PIE for short, sounded to me as if it could indeed be a warm, pleasant and tantalising experience, just like a piece of warm, sugar crusted, rhubarb PIE. Jane, the lead in this work, was bringing to it her rich established background in this field, myself and colleague Joanna also bringing our collaborative and individual work on the question of 'student-centred learning'. I looked forward to learning much from working together, with each other and our students, and saw the work as potentially playing a significant role in my developing profile as a researcher in higher education. However, what I observed as the project progressed was resistance. Resistance took various forms in the initial stages including 'problems' finding time to meet and plan as tutors and students together. The first meeting I recall in detail had been planned as a three-way with all main contributors to the initial stages of the Teaching Fellowship application. It ended up being two separate two-way meetings. This was to become a regular

occurrence for this project. Clashes with students' teaching and work timetables and colleagues' availability resulted in meetings that seldom involved all contributors to the work.

As we seemed to struggle to fit everything in, this resistance begged the question for me; have things changed in the university environment? What is causing the problems here? What do we not have now, that we had before? Why is it a problem to gather people together and take the work forward as a collective group? On the surface we appear to be doing so much on the subject of student voice that we are nearly bursting. But is this more to do with responses to market forces than genuine engagement with such voices? Surely we are carrying out learner-centred democratic forms of education as espoused by Dewey and Freire; isn't that what PIE was about? This project has clearly illuminated to me that we need to critique centre-held views on 'student voice' and centre led projects on student voice. For me, students' resistance, along with that of the academics involved at various points, mirrors the young child in the Hans Christian Andersen story. She speaks the truth and shouts clearly to be heard above the heads of the masses, "But look. The emperor wears no clothes!" Spoken earnestly and in ignorance of the controversy and fear induced 'lies' that surround her, our forms of resistance quietly connect in some ways to her story and her clear observation of the truth as it stood before her. This insight and the experience of writing my reflections on the project suggest to me the beginnings of a form of liberation.

### **'Mind the Gap': Joanna's perspective as a programme tutor**

I've been a tutor on the programme in question for ten years. When I joined the programme the degree documentation made very explicit reference to student voice in its rationale: to enable students first to discover a voice, then develop a voice and finally to make their voice heard and

join a community of voices in education as they completed the course. The promotion of student voice appeared to be an integral part of the degree's official curriculum as evidenced by the references to education for social justice, equality and inclusion in our programme and module documentation. Furthermore, in our work as a programme team there is plenty of evidence of our efforts to involve students in the wider programme network and other educational communities, through extra-curricular activities and regional or national conference participation, for example. In the last few years programme tutors have engaged various groups of students in a range of teaching and learning projects, co-research and writing for publication (see for example Gibson and Haynes et al, 2009). A number of tutors are deeply committed to dialogical, engaged and critical pedagogical approaches. Such personal philosophies and projects may have strengthened a sense that our relationship with our students is exceptionally open and collegiate. All of these factors may have led us to believe that such a strong focus on voice in our teaching would somehow lead to better conditions for our students to participate and have a strong voice in respect of their experiences as university students on our programme. Such a naïve belief however, potentially neglects the hidden curriculum and the wider policy context of higher education.

Establishing shared ownership of the PIE project was very tricky at the start. I had heard Jane make a presentation about her PAIRS project to third year students in 2010. There were clear indications of her creative methodology and successful data collection, particularly among postgraduate students. I had seen some of the high quality pieces of personal writing elicited through the project. However, the 'ready-made' nature of the project, and Jane's origination of it, made it more difficult for me to feel a sense of ownership of the research proposed at our university. Initially I felt like a 'broker' between Jane and the second year students on our programme than I did a co-researcher. I have wondered whether students who joined the steering group experienced that same sense of the project arriving 'ready-made' and their

having comparatively little involvement in shaping it. Were they similarly positioned as 'brokers' in a project that belonged to a Professor and other academic staff?

Although a small group of second year students volunteered to join the project steering group and designed their own method (the mood boards) for eliciting students' voices, the response rate was very disappointing. I felt concerned for the students who were working hard to persuade their peers to take part. As their efforts met with little success, they became disengaged. With this I noticed my growing sense of responsibility for their unsatisfactory experience of the project. Mindful that they would be developing their own research projects as part of their third year, I became concerned that this lack of success could impact on their motivation or confidence – in spite of assurances that research is full of problems to be solved. I wanted to ensure that we could complete the project. This resulted in my attempting to 'rescue' the data collection process by going into students' classes, or asking my colleagues in our team to do the same, to make in-class time for the mood boards to be created. This move on my part might only have heightened the students' disappointment and put them in an ambivalent position alongside their peers. The disenchantment described above and my decision to use my position as a tutor to try and encourage further student participation in the project was particularly valuable for my own reflections on our low response rates. At this stage of the project I became more aware of the risk of coercion as the project 'leaked' into the classrooms. However, the evidence is that the majority of the second year students continued to resist our efforts.

## DISCUSSION

The low levels of student participation meant that the PIE project was not the resounding success that the project partners hoped it might be. This raises for us many questions. Why, despite the fact that the project used participatory methods underpinned by a commitment to equal partnership and empowerment, did some of the narratives presented in this paper question the extent to which power really was shared between the project participants? Why, despite the fact that the academic members of the project were committed to facilitating 'voice' as evidenced by the programmes they designed and the previous research they had conducted were some voices apparently silenced in the project? In this section we will consider possible answers to these questions and use the concepts of power and resistance as lenses through which to examine our experiences.

### Power

The reflective narratives presented in this paper by project participants suggests that issues of power were played out with respect to issues of ownership and expertise. Both Alice and Joanna shared how they struggled at times to feel ownership of the project. Joanna writes of feeling like a broker between university colleagues and students, and of essentially feeling silenced as result. Alice writes of the tension felt at times when the project was presented with a perceived pre-ordained methodological framework. Whilst the causes for such tensions are likely to be multi-factorial; one factor that is likely to impact greatly on the perceived ownership of student engagement projects is the extent to which the policy driven drive for student engagement has distorted true forms of student centred democratic education, engagement and the liberation of voice as they were originally understood. Original theory and views on student-

centred education have perhaps become colonised by government drivers and policy, reproduced in Universities, as institutional policy, resulting in forms of 'student voice' practice as determined by everyone other than the actual student.

Linked to the issue of ownership is that of expertise. For example, Alice reflects on how the academics in the project presumed too much expertise on her part, which meant she did not always feel equipped to operate as an equal partner in the project. This issue would seem to be critical for the success of many student engagement projects that try to persuade students to invest time in ambitious, often creative, yet extra-curricular projects by suggesting they will gain valuable skills (often labelled as employability skills) through participation. The extent to which the university invests time in ensuring students are supported to learn these skills during the project or have the foundation upon which to improve these skills prior to the project is not always clear however. For Alice, the skills in question were research skills; but given our experience on this project, there may also be a case for ensuring that students have the skills required to both collaborate and lead in student engagement projects. If students are ill-equipped to negotiate decisions and communicate their personal ideas and objectives effectively and confidently then they may always struggle to share ownership of student engagement projects with their lecturers and universities.

In her narrative, Jane reflected on the challenges surrounding using the expertise of academic partners in student voice and engagement projects without disempowering students and others. At the heart of this challenge is the issue of "whose voice is being privileged" in student engagement work; which reflects concerns raised by both Carey (2012) and Bovill et al. (2011). The difficulties of assigning equal value to contributions is acknowledged but as yet unresolved in the participatory research literature (see for example, Walmsley, 2004). But in the student engagement and higher education literature the issue appears to have been dodged completely.

The Quality Assurance Agency, for example (QAA 2012b) appear to conceptualise equality as a legal rather than educational matter. Perhaps equality is a sound ideal, but unrealistic in practice. As Alice reflects: 'instinct tells you to avoid heavy disagreement with someone who has power over you, despite staff assertions that they value your real opinions'. This may shed a different light on student resistance to engaging in student voice projects. When we observe in an often incredulous manner that students resist the change that comes with co-creation and prefer traditional relationships with lecturers (Bovill et al. 2011); perhaps we should cease to apply pejorative labels to this behaviour such as 'passive' and instead offer some respect for their astuteness in appreciating the reality of the relationship they have with lecturers; a relationship in which they as students are perhaps minor rather than major shareholders.

## **Resistance**

Perhaps the largest sign of resistance in this project was the fact that over fifty of the second year students and forty of the first year students resisted taking part in any aspect of the project; despite our best efforts. We have considered many possible explanations for this resistance. The insights from Alice's reflection suggest that perhaps students felt that they could not afford to volunteer to give time to something that would not 'count towards their degree'. Perhaps they had 'voice fatigue' and could not easily distinguish between this initiative and other more traditional forms of student feedback and evaluation (e.g. end of module evaluation questionnaires) that they had also been asked to engage with. Perhaps we were wrong to presume that students would want to have a voice in their programme? Many student voice and engagement initiatives are built on two premises. The first premise is that students will want to have a say over their education. The second premise is that students will want to have say in order to correct the imperfect and change things for the better. One classic example of these two premises is the proliferation of 'student as change-agents' projects in the UK higher



education sector (See for example, Kay, Dunne and Hutchinson, 2010) We expect students to voice dissatisfaction and to steer universities in how to make improvements. As the Welsh Assembly (2009) put it, we expect them to be a 'force for influence and change'. We can see from Alice's narrative however, that some students may actually not be dissatisfied; in which case they may be resisting the role of disgruntled consumer that we seem to want to force upon them. In Alice's narrative, for example, the resistance is expressed in terms of wanting to 'step away from the consumerism which appears to be the driving force in current HE provision'. The desire to resist however caused tensions for her in terms of her perceptions regarding whether what she learned through participation was 'learning for learning sake' or learning to 'achieve a 2:1'. There may be a case therefore for revisiting what empowerment and engagement means in student voice work, with respect to being equally receptive to stories of satisfaction as dissatisfaction and being sensitive to the roles that we presume that students will take in these projects. In reflecting on these issues it may also be useful to draw comparisons from the participatory research and special educational needs literature. For example, Dyson (2007) examined and highlighted the tensions that exist when academic researchers make presumptions about people with learning disabilities and see them as oppressed, with a political agenda that they want to articulate. In similar fashion, in student engagement work, perhaps academics and their institutions position students as ignored, dissatisfied and wanting to have a say. But, on what authority do they make such presumptions?

In revisiting what kinds of voices or narratives we are receptive to, we may also need to revisit how we interpret silence. The silence of ninety or so students in this project has perturbed us, but perhaps it is a cause for celebration. In our earlier narratives our programme tutor participant, Joanna, reflected on the fact that the way the programme was designed and delivered was inherently underpinned by notions of voice and empowerment. Perhaps so few students took part in the PIE project because the programme in question had done such a good

job of liberating voice in other ways. The resistance observed therefore may simply be a resistance to what is perceived as a redundant project initiated from outside the programme. Perhaps our experiences of resistance in the PIE project are a response to efforts made by universities to increasingly be seen as concerned with 'student experience' which has led to the higher education marketplace leaning into participatory approaches to teaching and learning in higher education.

Finally, the narrative from our programme leader highlights another form of resistance- the immovable object that is workload and time-tables. Suanne reflected on the struggle that both academics and students had in fitting this project in with everything else they had to do. Some project participants therefore struggled to find the space to make the project happen in the way they wanted it to. This struggle existed despite the fact that the academics in the project were personally committed to the project and the institution had financially committed to the project. Giroux (2010) perhaps provides us with some insight on these points of resistance. He writes with power on the subject of the 'neo-liberal' state of play in higher education and warns that academic labour needs to be configured so as to enable the development of person-centred democratic education. This, he warns is unlikely to happen so long as academics continue to be over-worked and under-represented.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

In this paper we have reflected on our experiences of using participatory methods in a student voice and engagement project. We have used these reflections to critically examine the extent to which genuine partnerships between students and academics can be achieved. In doing so, we have revealed gaps between the rhetoric and the reality of student voice and engagement initiatives. These gaps highlight the need for a critical re-examination of how we conceptualise

students as 'partners' and the presumptions we make regarding the nature of partnerships that academics and institutions have with students. Current policy and research literature has a tendency to gloss over the complexities and contentiousness of the claims made regarding student voice and engagement. Our experience suggests that if we continue to ignore issues of power and resistance, we will fall far short of the vision of student engagement and the ideals of strong participation and expression of student voice. Echoing the questions that Ellsworth (1989) raised regarding the failure of critical pedagogy to empower, we would argue that it is important to ask questions about the potential of student engagement projects to genuinely empower all participants. Alongside such questioning we also need to ask questions about the assumption that the consumerist forces that are perceived to underpin student engagement work (Naidoo & Jamieson 2005), will have a positive impact on the practice of academic staff and therefore on students.

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Figure 1

